Getting Started On Mr. Reagan's Democracy Drive

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by Suzanne Garment

There stood Ronald Reagan before the British Parliament this week, surrounded by splendidly costumed beefeaters and parliamentary officials, delivering a ringing call for a drive by democratic nations to take the offense in fighting totalitarianism around the world. Near the end of his speech he offered some specific suggestions on how to start. The political parties of Western Europe, he said, had a tradition of aiding like-minded parties abroad. The two U.S. parties, together with an organization called the American Political Foundation, were about to launch a study of how the U.S. could best do the same kind of thing.

It is always a curiosity when an obscure group manages to get itself and its ideas promoted and immortalized in a presidential speech. So I called on the American Political Foundation and its president, George Agree, to see how such a thing had come to pass.

The headquarters of the organization is about as stark a contrast as you can get to the grandeur of Westminster. It consists of a single cluttered room in the back of a shabby townhouse on Capitol Hill. The foundation currently runs on a small budget, which it uses mainly to foster contacts between U.S. officials and their counterparts in the democratic countries of Europe.

But the group has always had bigger things in mind. It took as its model the example of West Germany, where each political party runs a foundation to give substantial aid to like-minded political groups abroad. And the APF managed to get the heads of the Democratic and Republican National Committees to serve as its chairman and vice chairman, thus establishing its claim to respectability and bipartisanship.

But the APF's entrepreneurship was not the only driving force behind the idea in Mr. Reagan's speech; the notion has been floated in a number of places. The AFL-CIO has repeatedly urged that we shore up the American capacity for political action abroad; William Colby wrote about the subject recently in the Washington Post. Moreover, the general climate has changed radically since the days when talk of U.S. political action abroad was derided as American neocolonialism. In fact, in this instance the State Department, no hotbed of aggressiveness, turned into a promoter of the idea. A well-placed Foreign Service officer named Mark Palmer developed the plan and shepherded it through the process of ratification by the rest of the government.

He did not meet with much opposition. "It's something I've felt strongly about for a long time," said Undersecretary for Political Affairs Lawrence Eagleburger, one of those who approved the plan, "the idea of our beginning to take the political offensive. And once it got to the White House, the President grabbed it very fast."

Not everyone was enthusiastic. Some worried that the Communists would view these activities as intrusive destabilization. Some were suspicious because the idea was being promoted by parts of the State Department whose hawkish credentials were suspect.

But in the end there was a fair degree of consensus. "We used to do some of this giving covertly," said one official. "But when we stopped being able to keep our secrets in these matters, people became unwilling to accept our money. The foundation idea is a way of getting around the problem."

What's due to happen now is that the American Political Foundation is to be given $350,000 to $400,000 for a major study of what form the American participation in the ideological wars should take. No one knows, of course, how good the study will be or how well it will succeed in building support for its conclusions. And no one knows how aggressive an operation the study will finally recommend. President Reagan's speech spoke of the model of the German political action units; the APF, needless to say, also has ambitious plans. In the State Department, though, there's more caution: "We're only in the middle of the process; it's not at fruition," warned an aide. "We don't know anything yet about this organization that's being designed. We're not even sure that money will pass through it."

So there is a chance that the enterprise will turn into a boondoggle or a piece of useless symbolism. That would be too bad. President Reagan's speech came in the middle of a week drenched in blood. The British finally began their major confrontation with the Argentinians in the Falklands; the Israelis finally moved against the PLO army feeding on the corpse of Lebanon. There were reminders everywhere of the breakdown of the postwar order and of what that breakdown is going to cost.

One sign of this breakdown is that in recent years the U.S. has been so timid about promoting its political interest abroad. Twenty-five years ago many such activities on our part were carried on covertly, as if in recognition that they were a kind of illegitimate interference in other countries' affairs. Recently they have just about ceased altogether, because we have lost the nerve to carry out covert operations.

It would be helpful to have organizations—perhaps run by our political parties—that could take government money but keep a large degree of autonomy in deciding how to disseminate the cash to democratic forces abroad. That the transactions would be open might keep some potential recipients from accepting our money. On the other hand, we are likely to benefit from the "purloined letter" advantage, with our activities seeming less titillating because they are more open.

Mr. Reagan's speech dealt only in possibilities. But his proposal at least recognized that what his foreign policy needs are some concrete ways to recapture the political offensive and begin reversing the fortunes of democratic ideas.